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The Modern Reader's Bo-Peep

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The Modern Reader's Bo-Peep

by John Miller

English, Sr.

Little Bo-Beep has lost her sheep,
And can't tell where to find them!
Leave them alone, and they'll come home,
Wagging their tails behind them.

Little Bo-Beep fell fast asleep,
And dreamt she heard them bleating;
But when she awoke, she found it a joke,
For they were still a-fleeting.

Then up she took her little crook,
Determined for to find them;
She found them indeed, but it made her heart bleed,
For they'd left their tails behind them.

It happened one day, as Bo-Beep did stray
Over a meadow hard by,
That there she espied their tails, side by side,
All hung on a tree to dry.

She heaved a sigh, and gave by and by
Each careless sheep a banging;
And as for the rest, she thought it was best,
Just to leave the tails a-hanging.

In attempting to elucidate Bo-Beep's motivations, and unweave some of the poem's intricate and tenuous symbolism, which, alone, I believe, makes this work a modern classic, I have found that the new Freudian tool of analysis

is the only way the true Bo-Beep can be made meaningful to modern readers. That Mother Goose's own knowledge of this tool should predate Freud need not puzzle us. The man who wrote *Oedipus Rex* knew this tool long before Goose, although Goose's use of it is by far more dexterous and knowledgeable, as we shall see. In fact, it is amazing to me how Goose's works should ever have gravitated to an audience of children, but, perhaps this is a comment on the superficiality of our generation. At any rate, I propose to provide the key to at least one Goose work before it is lost to sophisticated students of human behavior.

The first stanza finds Bo-Beep in the dilemma that must have been as common in Goose's time as in our own. The first line hits us with the immediate fact that Bo-Beep is no longer a virgin. Animal symbolism, of course, nearly always has a sexual connotation, and here it is not so much the sheep but the whiteness of the wool, whiteness being the obvious symbol for chastity and purity. That Bo-Beep can't "tell" where to find her lost purity is a biting comment on the realism of our times, in that the victim cannot "tell," and therefore perhaps does not even know, the identity of her seducer. We begin to see the pathos of this situation in the third line, where we find the victim's hopeless lament and wish for the return of her maidenhead. Here the poem takes on some of the realistic flavor of Hardy, and conveys some of that poet's bitterness, though with considerably more effect, because Bo-Beep actually believes she will be made pure again, where the people in Hardy's poetry were nearly always as pessimistic as he was. The last line of the stanza carries even further the pathetic phallusy of the sheep-maidenhead complex. The sheep will return, Bo-Beep believes, but with their tails reversed. This is a rare blend of poor poetics but tremendously deep symbolism. The statement is poetically poor because it is superfluous. Did Goose, after all, think that the tails would wag in front of the sheep? If this were the case, Bo-Beep's trauma would be seen to have precipitated a pre-psychotic penis-envy syndrome, wherein the tails wagging in front of the sheep would most realistic-

ally represent Bo-Beep's sub-conscious, post-traumatic wish to become, or rather be, a male, poetically, a ram, divorced at last from the femininity she now no longer believes she owns. The male sheep certainly represents the thing farthest from being at all female. But Goose has puzzlingly chosen to place the tails behind the sheep. In all probability, then, the tail symbolizes the pudendum, specifically, Bo-Beep's, representing Bo-Beep's neurotic sublimation of the sex drive—suppressing it—putting it behind the sheep, where she can no longer see and therefore have to acknowledge it.

Bo-Beep's repression of the traumatic material carries her further into the fast-developing psychotic state, as made clear to us in the second stanza. In her decompensation, she has regressed to having visual hallucinations, seen in the dream of the bleating of the sheep. By way of hallucination, she imagines she hears her virginity calling to her, in which case it would not really be lost but found again as easily as bleating sheep. But the reality of the situation is forever brought back to her, ("For they were still a-fleeing."), driving her further into her madness.

In the third stanza we find Bo-Beep has become actively psychotic, and is obsessed with penis-envy. Mentally, she has finally become a male, as symbolized by "her little crook," in the first line. Goose's genius comes through here clearly, for while the phallic shepherd's crook represents the straight, erect penis, the bend or hook in the end brings us back with finality to Bo-Beep's impotence in dealing with her plight—a plight which Goose has, at this point, somewhat overstated, we must admit. Turning herself into a male, Bo-Beep has brought herself back, in her mind, to a virgin state. She has found her sheep, but "They'd left their tails behind them." Bo-Beep here envisions herself as perfectly asexual, permanently pure and virgin, as indicated by the absence of "tail." Bo-Beep's many fantasies get out of hand here, but they are perfect in emphasizing her insanity.

Bo-Beep continues to hallucinate in the fourth stanza. Here we might speak of the double significance of her name. First, she has an abrupt "Peep" into the reality of sex.

Secondly, this peep causes her to further peep into, or hallucinate, the unreal. The "Meadow hard by" can be no other than the wasteland of Eliot, here, the mentally asexual world of Bo-Beep and the tailless sheep. That the meadow should be "hard" indicates this unequivocally. Here in the meadow, Bo-Beep has triumphantly hanged, or killed, sex. The tails are hung to dry, dryness being universally used to mean sterility.

After much thought, I have decided that the last stanza culminates in Bo-Beep's perfect madness. She has momentarily fallen back from asexuality, the preferable alternative, to her male state, and vacillates between the two in classic schizoid manner. This evanescent reversion to masculinity is seen perhaps too vividly in the first and second lines, where she gives each sheep a "banging" with her phallic staff. We can forgive Goose the lapse into crudity, because the effect of realism is heightened—quite in line with the rest of the poem. The last two lines are perhaps Goose's own comment on the situation, leaving the "tails a-hanging" meaning that Bo-Beep's asexual state is perhaps her best choice. And in view of the mess Bo-Beep has gotten herself into, we might agree with just that.

So we see what results from that kind of indulgence; there is perhaps some Bo-Beep in all of us. I am currently involved in piecing together what I hope to be the definitive Goose. And in doing so, I have found enough to conclude that, while Eliot may still hold the persuasive sway, Goose will finally supersede Eliot in importance. This has been my hope from the very start and what I have tried to do in my own poetry, which has some of the Goose flavor but is, through no fault of Goose, even more in tune with Freud, who gave us a start but lacked the poetic imagination to universalize his ideas, as Goose has tried to do. It is amazing to me that the fine old editions of these rhymes, abundantly available as they are, have not been truly discovered until now. No sophisticated reader, or no serious student of psychoanalysis, should ever get by without having at least one good Goose.